DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 194 825 CG 014 766

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TITLE Guilt and Self-Criticism in Depression.
PUB DATE Apr 80
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association (51st, Hartford, CT, April 9-12, 1980). Best copy available.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Patterns; *Cognitive Processes; Coping; *Depression (Psychology); Emotional Disturbances; Interpersonal Competence; Learning Theories; *Personality Problems; Problem Solving; Psychopathology; Recall (Psychology); *Self Evaluation (Individuals); *Social Adjustment
IDENTIFIERS *Guilt

ABSTRACT

Do depressed people interpret guilt-provoking situations differently than nondepressed people? Cognitive-behavioral theories of psychopathology would predict that they do, since a major premise of such theories is that maladaptive emotional patterns are mirrored in distinct cognitive responses. Highly depressed subjects in an exploratory study of this question were significantly harsher in evaluations of their own guilt-provoking behavior, and were significantly less likely to provide a justification for it, than were mildly depressed and nondepressed subjects. The depressed groups were also significantly more likely, than the nondepressed group, to focus on guilt-provoking situational features and to identify self-oriented, rather than interpersonal, behaviors as guilt-provoking. Future investigation should attempt to distinguish the cognitive biases or distortions (e.g., selective recall, overly strict self-evaluative standards, attributions to internal causality) that may contribute to these differences. (Author/CS)

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Guilt and Self-Criticism in Depression

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Paper presented at the meeting of the

Eastern Psychological Association, Hartford,

April, 1980

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From Sigmund Freud (1917, 1959) to Aaron Beck (1967), clinical accounts of depression have identified excessive and inappropriate feelings of guilt as a symptom of depression. Guilt has been defined in ways that imply a wide range of causal theories, but as a symptom, it can best be defined descriptively--as a conscious, unpleasant emotion which is directed at oneself. Guilt involves feelings of regret for some outcome coupled with responsibility for it. This definition draws on the thinking of Martin Hoffman (1975) and Derek Wright (1971). Certain features of guilt should make it especially intriguing for researchers concerned with depression: In the first place, to feel guilt implies perceiving a negative outcome--in particular, that one's behavior violates one's values. Beck (1967) and Bandura (1977a), among others, have suggested biassed perception of negative outcomes is characteristic in depression. Second, one feels guilty for events for which one feels personal responsibility. An inordinate tendency to attribute personal responsibility to negative outcomes in depression is a prominent feature of the reformulated theory of helplessness put forth by Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale (1978).

Yet the area of depression and guilt has been virtually untouched by empirical research. The unanswered questions are both quantitative--do depressed people indeed

feel more guilt than nondepressed ones, and what conditions affect these differences?--and qualitative--do depressed people interpret guilt-provoking situations differently than non-depressed people? Cognitive-behavioral theories of psychopathology would predict such qualitative differences, since a major premise of theirs is the idea that maladaptive emotional patterns are mirrored in distinctive cognitive responses. The present study was designed as an initial exploration of qualitative differences in reactions to guilt-provoking situations as a function of depression.

As befits an exploratory study, the theoretical profile was low. The general premise was that cognitive responses conducive to self-criticism would be more common among depressed than nondepressed persons. A number of otherwise differing cognitive theories agree on this prediction. For instance, the internal attributional bias for negative outcomes which the reformulated theory of helplessness (Abramson et al., 1978) proposes would increase self-criticism. Stringent self-evaluative standards, which Bandura (1977b) views as key to depression, would dispose depressed persons to perceiving more situations as involving failure to meet personal standards. Deficient cognitive skills for coping and problem-solving, emphasized by Gotlib and Asarnow (1979) and by Rehm (1977), would be reflected in lessened ability to cope with guilt-provoking situations. And Beck's (1967)

proposed negative schema and cognitive distortions would result in self-castigating interpretations of otherwise neutral situations.

To explore the nature of self-criticism in depression, we chose to study guilt-provoking situations reported by subjects themselves. The contrasting strategy of presenting standard situations to all subjects has many evident assets. At the same time, a fascinating and little understood aspect of guilt is the wide range of experiences which different people find guilt-provoking (Klass, 1978). We wished to avoid unduly constraining the type of situation subjects responded to, therefore. We also wanted to obtain empirically a range of guilt-provoking situations for use in future studies. Therefore, we devised a Situation Questionnaire on which subjects described a guilt-provoking situation they had experienced and on which open-ended questions tapped a number of features relating to self-critical cognitions.

One hundred and fifty-one college students (90 men and 61 women) participated in the study. The Situation Questionnaire elicited a description of a "recent situation in which you felt guilty". The key open-ended questions concerned how the subject had reacted in the situation, his/her reasons for the guilt-provoking action, ideas about why he/she felt guilty, and possible alternative behaviors. Responses were coded for self-criticism-relevant features,

which were defined for each question on an a priori basis. The coding system drew on previous content analysis systems developed by Bandura, Underwood, and Fromson (1975), and by Sutton-Simon and Goldfried (1979). The responses were coded by the authors, who were blind as to depression scores. A second rater, blind to all experimental hypotheses and to depression scores, made ratings on 30 randomly selected protocals, and interrater agreement averaged 81%. Thus, the salient aspects of self-criticism could be reliably identified.

The measure of depression was the long form of the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI: Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961), which was administered in counterbalanced order with the Situation Questionnaire. Using BDI scores, the group was divided into a lower third (the nondepressed group), a middle third (the mild-depressed group), and an upper third (the high-depressed group). The BDI scores of the nondepressed group were 0 to 3, of the mild-depressed group, 4 to 8, and of the high-depressed group, 9 and above. There were no effects of sex or order of test administration on self-criticism, so both sexes and orders of administration were combined for the analysis.

First, reports of reactions in the guilt-provoking situations were classified as neutralizing--for example, apologizing or deciding the behavior was not negative--versus negative-focus, which would maintain self-criticism

and guilt--for example, thinking about how hurt the other person looked. Negative-focus reactions were expected to be more common with depression, because they reflect the tendency to emphasize aversive features of experience and a lack of coping skills to neutralize the unpleasant situation. Mild-depressed and high-depressed groups were indeed significantly more likely to report negative-focus reactions than the non-depressed group; χ^2 (2)=6.88, p .04. The increased negative focus would maintain awareness of aspects of the situations which would provoke self-criticism.

The reasons subjects reported for their guilt-provoking behavior were classified in terms of the presence of self-justifications. Self-justifications included personal desires and incentives (e.g.,"I wanted to enjoy myself for once") as well as attributions to external forces that dictated the behavior ("the-devil-made-me-do-it" attributions). Since self-justifications give extenuating circumstances and diminish self-evaluative reactions, they were expected to be less common among depressed persons. This expectation was borne out. Self-justification was significantly less common among the high-depressed group than in either the nondepressed or mild-depressed group, χ^2 (2)=5.01, p .02. Only 67% of the high-depressed group provided self-justifications, while 90% of the mild-depressed and nondepressed groups did.

Another dimension relevant to self-criticism was the harshness with which the subjects evaluated their guilt-provoking action. Relatively harsh negative evaluations were expressed in emotionally intense descriptions, as opposed to more factual descriptions of the guilt-provoking situation. An example may clarify this distinction. Negative evaluation would be scored for "I compromised myself and gave in to weakness", while "I hurt someone's feelings" would not be so scored. Analysis of variance of negative evaluation scores showed a significant effect of depression, $F(2, 148)=6.22$, $p<.01$. Individual comparisons using Newman-Keuls tests showed the high-depressed group expressed significantly more negative evaluations than the mild-depressed or nondepressed groups, who did not differ. Thus, the high-depressed group was more intensely negative about the nature and magnitude of their transgression.

A serendipitous finding concerning the types of situations reported as guilt-provoking is relevant here. Situational content was classified as self-oriented (for example, breaking a diet, not studying) versus social (for example, forgetting a social obligation, expressing annoyance at a friend). There was a highly significant difference in the likelihood of self-oriented content as a function of depression, χ^2 (2)=7.29, p .003. The mild- and high-depressed groups reported self-oriented content significantly more

frequently than the non-depressed group. These self-oriented situations appear mild or even trivial to an outside observer. One wonders--might their frequency reflect a more stringent and self-critical view of even minor failings.

Finally, subjects also had an opportunity to provide a possible alternative to their guilt-provoking behavior. The mild-depressed and high-depressed groups were significantly less likely to describe something they could have done instead of the guilt-provoking action than the nondepressed group, χ^2 (2)=8.54, $p < .02$. This difference may reflect a deficit in problem-solving skills with depression (Gotlib & Asarnow, 1979). The lack of alternative suggestions resembles response uncontrollability (Abramson et al., 1978) and lessened self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977a). Coupled with the harsher self-criticism found in the depressed groups, it is consistent with Abramson and Sackeim's (1977) proposal of a paradoxical combination of self-blame and uncontrollability in depression.

To summarize: The high-depressed subjects were significantly less likely to express a justification for their guilt-provoking behavior and, in fact, expressed significantly harsher evaluations of their behavior as negative and transgressive than the nondepressed and mild-depressed groups. The high-depressed and mild-depressed subjects were significantly more likely to report reactions that would maintain focus on guilt-provoking aspects of the situation and less

likely to provide an alternative behavior they could have engaged in. Thus, the findings are consistent with the notion of differences in how guilt-provoking situations are interpreted, and, in particular, with greater self-criticism, as a function of depression.

The results should encourage further investigation, for the study was not designed to distinguish which of several relevant cognitive biasses have roles in the obtained differences. First, selective recall and reporting of experiences that provoke more negative and self-critical reactions may be involved. Here, Beck's (1967) notion of a negative schema for interpreting the past is pertinent. Or the differences may reflect actual behavioral differences relating to depression, including lessened social interaction, more frequent self-control failures, and lessened ability to extricate oneself from aversive rumination, as coping skills models like those of Rehm (1977) and Gotlib and Asarnow (1979) would predict. Third, similar situations may be viewed as more self-disappointing by depressed persons, due to characteristic cognitive distortions. These might include stricter self-evaluative standard, so that more situations are perceived as transgressive (Bandura's major emphasis, 1977b) and biassed attributions to internal causality, as Abramson et al. (1978) suggest.

To move further in distinguishing these possible sources of the current findings, standard situations must be presented to all subjects. Dependent measures that distinctly tap the differing mediational processes should be used. One such study is currently being conducted (Klass, Note 1). In this research, the possible differences in guilt situation content are followed up, as well, by comparing responses to standard social versus self-control situations as a function of depression.

Clearly, the exploratory nature and non-standard stimuli impose limits on the present study. At the same time the approach has some virtues. By leaving responses more open than usual, new patterns could be revealed, such as the possible distinction between social and self-oriented situations. The Situations Questionnaire did indeed tap a wide range of guilt situations beyond those which could be manipulated experimentally. For instance, forgetting social obligations was one of the most commonly described guilt-provoking experiences. Our knowledge of such areas of guilt will enhance the content validity of future research on guilt and depression.

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